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Destructive belief systems and violent behavior within and between groups and identities

Amber M. Gaffney¹, Michael A. Hogg², & Dominic Abrams³

¹California State Polytechnic University Humboldt, ²Claremont Graduate University, ³University of Kent

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Amber Gaffney
Department of Psychology
California State Polytechnic University Humboldt
Arcata, CA 95521
amber.gaffney@humboldt.edu

Abstract

This special issue celebrates 25 years of the Sage journal *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*. In this article, we use examples of the current sociopolitical climate to highlight the importance of the scientific inquiry into group processes and intergroup relations. Ingrained identities that arise from groups are responsible for cause wars, protests, community clashes with law enforcement, violence, climate change, major public health crises, and societal change. However, just as blame goes to groups, collectives can be harnessed for solutions. This special issue contains 13 articles that showcase the diversity of research in *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, all of which contribute to theory advancement and the application of science to real world issues.

Destructive belief systems and violent behavior within and between groups and identities

Hamas' October 7, 2023 attack massacred at least 1,200 Israelis and internationals ([CSIS, 2024](#)). The Israeli government's responding assault on Gaza has resulted in over 29,000 Palestinian deaths ([Associated Press, 2024](#)). This humanitarian crisis brings the threat of famine to Gaza, promising to increase the Palestinian death toll. In April of 2024, U.S. campuses erupted with protests, calling for their campuses and the U.S. government to divest all interests in Israel and to call for an immediate ceasefire. Pro-Palestinian protestors currently occupy an increasing number of U.S. campuses (including the first author's home institution), shutting down classes, while university administrations close commencement celebrations. This has resulted in over 120 protester arrests ([The New York Times, 2024](#)). The intractable divide between Israelis and Palestinians is echoed in these university protests, with pro-Palestinian protestors fighting for human rights and an end to genocide, and administrations and some Jewish students pointing out anti-Semitism in the signs, chants, and tags that rip across campuses (e.g., "*From the River to the Sea*"). The press coverage of these protests and the interpretation of events on each campus are colored not only by the identity lens through which people view the war but the more specific intergroup context of students vs. administrations and protestors vs. law enforcement. Protestors are either being needlessly beaten by police for their non-violent occupations or are inciting mass destruction on campuses. The Israeli government is either defending itself or engaging in genocide. This context and the embedded nature of people's identities make the situation ripe for misinformation and further polarization. The humanitarian crisis in Gaza, Hamas' assault on Israel, and the responding protests on U.S. campuses mark the extreme measures people are willing to take to defend and fight for causes that arise out of identities embedded in specific intergroup contexts.

Groups fundamentally define the human experience. Most of us work in groups (e.g., collaborative scholarship, committees), play in groups (e.g., gyms, cribbage clubs), volunteer in groups (e.g., beach clean-ups, fundraisers), and are born into groups (e.g., families, socioeconomic groups). Many of us fight on behalf of groups (e.g., collective protests, armed struggle), and some of us die because of our group memberships (e.g., genocide, ethnic cleansing). Humans are active participants in group life - we are shaped by our group memberships and we shape the groups to which we belong. This journal, *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations (GPIR)*, is dedicated to the scientific study of groups in all of their beautiful and horrific glory.

This special issue of *GPIR* celebrates the journal's 25th anniversary since its launch in 1998. During this quarter century, *GPIR* has arguably become social psychology's preeminent scientific journal dedicated exclusively to research on processes and interaction within and between groups and on how attitudes and behavior are configured and framed by our ingroups and outgroups. In addition to its regular issues, *GPIR* has published 39 special issues (this is the 40th) each of which has examined a distinctive challenge in our quest to understand group and intergroup phenomena. The journal's contributors directly engage social and societal issues, such as climate change, policing, radicalization, health behavior, social protest, the erosion of social order, and so much more, through their diverse research and methods.

As culture and society change, the methods available to study human interactions within and between groups expands. For example, crowd sourced samples and the use of social media such as Reddit and X (formerly Twitter) as a means of data collection was rare 25 years ago (actually, impossible, because each platform was launched one and two years after the birth of *GPIR*). *GPIR* scholars have evolved with technology and societal changes, thus the methods

have expanded and so have contributions to theory. For example mass collective protests such as Black Lives Matter occur both online and in the streets. These different contexts affect both the numbers of people engaging and their means of engagement. Such changes in social interaction and participation require new research methods. Whilst embracing these innovations, *GPIR* has maintained a strong theoretical focus on addressing societal issues by studying how individuals and society are connected through groups and group memberships.

Groups are neither inherently evil nor inherently good. Groups and intergroup relations have many positive consequences for individuals and society and lie at the heart of what makes us human, such as our use of language, cooperation, or creativity. However, groups can be and often are problematic, and are the source of destructive behaviors and human suffering – oppression, exclusion, violence, prejudice, and war. This dark side of group life is a fundamental part of humanity’s most pressing issues. Unsurprisingly then, it is the focus of much of the research published over the decades in *GPIR*, and we suspect will remain so. Yet the same processes that underpin these phenomena also contribute to the vibrancy and capacity of groups to engineer positive change. By definition, social and societal change is forged from the deviant actions of individual group members, subgroups, or groups engaged in intergroup conflict. Thus, innovative solutions to societal and global issues come from these non-normative acts committed by the “extremists” who seek change. Some deviance tears groups and societies apart; others pursue a socially progressive agenda that serves the wider social good.

The 13 articles published in this particular issue of *GPIR* focus on the problematic aspects of group processes and intergroup relations, their aftermath, and the solutions that arise out of *GPIR* research. They overview the state of the science regarding destructive belief systems and violent behavior within and between groups and identities, each from their own perspective.

Here, we organize the articles thematically (other thematic organizations are possible as there is thematic and theoretical overlap among many of the articles) and broadly overview the research and general contribution to the overarching focus of this special issue on problematic aspects of group processes and intergroup relations.

Group and Identity-based Hostility, Threat and Violence

The first three articles (by **Blanchard; Ellenberg & Kruglanski;** and **Stroebe & Leander**) discuss aspects of contemporary large-scale hostility, threat, and violence. Blanchard focuses on how extremism can emerge and be sustained by online communities. This paper proposes a new construct for understanding what binds together online communities: Sense of Community (Entitativity). **Blanchard** outlines how a sense of community is underpinned by a group's perceived entitativity and the development and maintenance of clear ingroup-defining prototypes. Importantly, Blanchard argues that when prototypical online community members focus on specific (often demonized) outgroups, those communities are likely to embrace extremism. **Ellenberg and Kruglanski** present an analysis of the roots of radicalization that they trace to individual and group-based motivations. Using their 3N model, they detail the role of the third N (the Network) in equipping individuals with a radicalized and shared worldview that provides them with confidence in their actions and also the ability to achieve hero and martyr status. **Stroebe and Leander** address the roots of gun violence, particularly in America. They specifically focus on the implications of culture for gun ownership. They describe how, in the American context, the culture of gun ownership is underpinned by feelings of threat that arise in a racist system, in which members of the dominant white majority have historically demonized and feared Black and Brown men. Their overview and analysis show that the American problem

of gun ownership is a product of intergroup relations, in contrast to other nations that have a historical gun culture or simply do not have personal gun ownership.

Backlash, Narcissism and Populism

The next three articles (by **Rios; Golec de Zavala; and Van Prooijen**) focus on predictors of group-based threat and violence. **Rios's** article, building on Stroebe and Leander's argument that racism and fear of others predict gun ownership, examines the theme of White identity threat, largely in an American context, and associated backlash against multiculturalism. She argues that whiteness is multifaceted. Consequently, despite their membership in a dominant group, many whites can feel distinctiveness threat which is often described as lacking clear definition or self-defining culture, and which can be mitigated by focusing on the complexities of whiteness. **Golec de Zavala** also focuses on the collective threat felt by national narcissists, members of nationally advantaged groups who feel a great need to be recognized and are thus threatened by and lash out against disadvantaged groups. She argues that national narcissism poses a threat to democracy, by promoting populism. Populism is also a theme in **Van Prooijen's** article, which explores the role of people's feelings of threat and being "othered" in their endorsement of conspiracy theories. He proposes that conspiracy theories provide people with a collective worldview, shared by others, that can transform abstract feelings of mistrust and threat into specific allegations that detail plotted ill-will. Conspiracy theory endorsement acts as a creative way for people to feel positively about themselves and their worldviews. This can lead people to want to fight on behalf of falsehoods and support populist sentiments aimed toward tearing down the system that they believe is out to get them.

Normative Transgression, Deviance and Social Control

Articles 7 and 8 (by **Davies et al.**; and **Pinto and Marques**) explore causes and reactions to transgressive and deviant behaviors. **Davies et al.** focus on ingroup and outgroup members' reactions when political leaders (and other politicians) transgress norms and regulations. Using a novel method of analyzing people's responses to members of the British Parliament's transgression on X (formerly Twitter), they show that ingroup leaders' transgressions are often overlooked or even lauded. Such transgressions can inspire the ingroup and alienate the outgroup. This work highlights the political challenges involved in holding political leaders accountable for misbehaviors. As Party members' communications focus on protecting and enhancing the image of their leader, those leaders may in turn be emboldened, while failure to punish their transgressions is likely to erode trust in formal institutions. Outgroup members may be drawn to more radical measures, such as the desire to completely overhaul governments. **Pinto and Marques** propose an integrative model that describes underlying motives for exerting social control over deviance. This seamlessly addresses responses to ingroup deviance, outgroup deviance, member deviance, and leader deviance. Importantly, Pinto and Marques suggest that when social control fails, people develop conspiratorial thinking, and some are willing to take to vigilantism because they believe that their institutions and governments are illegitimate and acting against the people.

Solving Large-scale Social Problems: Policing, Health, Climate Change

The articles described until this point detail the social psychological mechanisms that drive people to extremes for their identities. However, applied research grounded in knowledge of group processes and intergroup relations also provides solutions to large-scale social and environmental issues. The next 3 articles (by **Giles et al.**; **Haslam et al.**; and **Pearson et al.**) focus on ways to reduce group-related threats and violence. **Giles et al.** explore the role played

by intergroup (mis)communication between the police and the public and suggest how such (mis)communication and its often-dire consequences can be combatted. They integrate several lines of research to demonstrate when and how communication between law enforcement and the people they serve breaks down. By framing the issue as being fundamentally rooted in intergroup relations, they suggest that solutions reside in creating positive intergroup contact and communication between law enforcement and the public.

Earlier in this special issue, Ellenberg and Kruglanski and Blanchard provided theoretical frameworks for understanding different forms of extremism, some of which argue that social isolation can lead people to seek out online communities that exist because of the shared grievances of their members. **Haslam and colleagues** address often overlooked public health issues: isolation and loneliness. Isolation and loneliness pose threats to mental and physical health and well-being. Loneliness predicts heart disease, alcohol consumption, obesity, suicide ideology, and dementia and disproportionately affects vulnerable and marginalized communities (e.g., elderly people, and members of the LGBTQ+ community; [CDC, 2024](#)). Haslam and colleagues' three-tier model of "social prescribing" is based firmly in the social identity tradition and uses the basic principles of social identification to specify how health practitioners can most effectively deploy social prescribing to address and reduce loneliness: Encourage identification, interaction, and engagement with important groups. Finally, in this section, **Pearson et al.** tackle perhaps the greatest crisis the world faces – human-caused climate change. They discuss the challenges posed by group processes for climate change and provide evidence that climate change is a significant social justice issue. More than showing how groups harm one another and the planet, they also stress that groups are key to creating beneficial change in people's climate-related attitudes and practices.

Social Change: Deviant Voices, Group and Societal Composition, Collective Protest

The final two articles (by **Anjewierden et al.**; and **Leach et al.**) focus on how and why groups and societies change. **Anjewierden et al.** focus specifically and theoretically on how deviance exerts change in group composition and thus, through intergroup polarization and depolarization, society. They introduce a model, grounded in the social identity tradition to understand how two basic motives for social identification (uncertainty reduction and collective enhancement) underlie responses to deviance. Groups sometimes punish their deviants, but deviance can transform groups in both positive and negative ways. **Leach et al.** provide a wide-ranging description of how social protest can be a potent mechanism for societal change. They argue that there is a highly dynamic and complex temporal interplay of actions located at the individual, interpersonal, group, and inter-group level of analysis, and across social, cultural, political, and economic domains. They employ multiple innovative methods to study the global phenomena of protest and when and how it works to create social change.

Concluding Comments

The work showcased in this 25th Anniversary special issue illustrates the mission of *GPIR*: bringing together and advancing social psychological scholarship and research on group processes and intergroup relations, which ultimately address societal issues. Some of this work explores theory that advances the boundaries of our knowledge, and covers methodological advances that can expand how we conduct research and continue to innovate the field. And some of this work provides tools that help us apply our current and developing knowledge to address important social issues. All of it is representative of *GPIR*'s rich history and helps pave its path into the future. The topics and programs of research reflect the passion of the scholars behind

them. These scholars are at various career points, representing seasoned giants who continue to shape the field and new scholars who will innovate and shape *GPIR*'s future.

It is risky to attempt to predict future research directions, emphases, and trajectories. So, in this special issue we have focused on areas and topics that have been popular and enduring themes over 25 years (we have had to be selective rather than comprehensive) and drawn on what seem to be contemporary social issues that affect or will affect many nations across the globe. These broad issues relate, for example, to climate change, population movement, political stability, disadvantage and resource scarcity, physical and mental health, economic uncertainty, technology and change in how we interact and how we work, and an emerging new world order. Group processes and intergroup relations researchers are likely to be affected by these global issues. We can therefore expect more research focusing on, for example, intergroup contact, power, extremism, reactions to socio-cultural diversity in society and small groups, realistic and identity threat, the hegemony of AI and online communication, autocratic versus democratic social orders and leadership structures, collective violence, alternative "truths", the cancellation of expertise, and strategies of group-based influence and attitudinal/behavioral change.

GPIR's success comes not only from the outstanding work of its contributors but also the collective effort of the editors-in-chief, the managing editors, the 18 associate editors, the editorial board, and the scholars who dedicate their time to ad-hoc reviewing. This special issue came to fruition in part from the hard work of the managing editors Zoe Horsham and Ashleigh Haydock-Symonds. We would also like to thank Olivia Kuljian, Sam Gardner, Benjamin Anjewierden, and Lily Syfers for their help in the editorial process, and our publishers, SAGE Publications, Sophie Donnelly and her predecessor senior editors, for their unstinting support and enthusiasm for *GPIR* over the past quarter century.

